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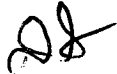
## County of Los Angeles DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES

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September 20, 2004

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From: David Sanders, Ph.D.   
Director

### CHILDREN MISSING IN FOSTER CARE: BOARD ITEM NO. 9, APRIL 20, 2004

On April 20, 2004, your Board instructed the Department of Children and Family Services (the Department) in collaboration with the Sheriff's Department, the Department of Health Services, Mental Health, Juvenile Court, Probation Department, Public Social Services, local law enforcement agencies, local school districts and other organizations as needed, to review the comprehensive guidelines created by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) and report back in 90 days on the feasibility of strategies for locating missing youth in foster care.

Most youth missing in foster care fall into two categories: runaway youth who voluntarily leave their placements and abducted children who are removed by another person and are the victims of a criminal act.

Los Angeles County already has comprehensive protocols in place to deal with the recovery of abducted children. The focus of this report will be on the development of strategies for addressing runaway foster youth.

On any given day in Los Angeles County there is an average of 500 to 700 youth that have runaway from foster care. The demographics of these youth run the gamut of those with a history of multiple runaways to those with a first episode. Regardless of individual history, this is a significant problem that places the youth in jeopardy of serious physical and/or sexual abuse, exposure to substance abuse and exploitation.

A countywide task force on Children Missing in Foster Care has been convened to develop collaborative approaches for further addressing this serious and complex problem. In the April 20, 2004 Motion, your Board suggested a number of strategies for consideration. They are:

**1. The development of a 1-800 missing children hotline.**

The Department has a 1-800 number dedicated to runaway youth. The number is administered by the Runaway Adolescent Project (RAP). The RAP unit's mission is to work with the Department's runaway population and non-agency related runaways in Los Angeles County. The Department will explore expanding this number to a 24/7 live operation. The number will then be advertised to Department youth as a help line and to the community to report information about runaway youth.

**2. The reporting of the missing children to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) to allow for quick posting on the national website.**

The majority of our runaway population remains in the local area. At present any Department youth that runs away is posted on the Los Angeles County Runaway and Abducted Foster Youth website within 24 hours of leaving placement. This website is accessible on a nationwide basis. The Task Force evaluated reporting missing children directly to NCMEC and feels that it would be duplicative.

**3. The creation of a collaborative structure comprised of representatives from the Sheriff's Department, local law enforcement, the Department and other agencies and organizations as needed, with the specific mission to locate the missing youth within 120 days.**

Collaborative efforts between social service agencies and law enforcement are critical to developing more effective runaway protocols. In reviewing existing policies and practice, the Department's social workers are charged with the responsibility of conducting ongoing and diligent efforts to locate runaway youth. While this is good social work practice, it is a stand-alone effort by the social worker. As members of the Task Force, both the Sheriff's Department and Los Angeles Police Department have pledged their commitment to giving a high priority to the quick recovery of runaway foster youth. Additionally, input from the Los Angeles County Office of Education and various County school districts is being used to assist in obtaining school records for missing foster youth. Furthermore, the Department of Public Social Services has suggested information in their databases might be used to assist in locating missing children. Such collaborations should greatly strengthen our ability to find these youth.

The Department is modifying its existing Street Outreach Services (SOS) unit to focus staff efforts on locating and counseling runaway foster youth. At present the SOS unit,

seeks out, and counsels the general runaway youth population in Los Angeles County. The new more focused direction of SOS will be to work closely with the runaway youth's social worker and caregiver as well as other agencies providing services to runaway youth in a concerted effort to find and safely return runaway foster youth. SOS staff will also assume the responsibility of administering the Los Angeles County Runaway and Abducted Foster Children Website. One of their first tasks will be to develop a demographic database on this population and a method of tracking progress in both prevention and recovery of missing foster youth.

The Website is an important tool for posting descriptive material and pictures of runaway/abducted children and also for developing critical demographic data on trends in runaways and behavioral characteristics. It can further be used to pinpoint foster placements with frequent incidents of runaway behavior. This and other input from members of the Task Force will be used to better monitor provider outcomes and develop improved strategies for prevention and recovery of runaway foster youth.

Collaborative efforts also exist between Juvenile Dependency Court and the Department. The Dependency Court is making assertive efforts to locate runaway youth by requiring that Protective Custody Warrant Requests submitted to the court by the Department include detailed information about efforts to locate the youth. This information includes the possible reasons why youth have run away from their foster placements, where they possibly may be, or to whom they may have run. Additionally, when the youth is found and the protective custody warrant is recalled, the court is requiring the youth to be present at the recall hearing. The court is making inquiries of the youth as to the reasons he/she ran away and this information is shared with the Children's Social Worker in an effort to prevent recurrence of the runaway behavior.

#### **4. The inclusion of outcome measures in upcoming Foster Family Agency and Group Home contracts regarding improved relations between children and care providers.**

The Association of Community Human Services Agencies (ACHSA) represents many group home providers and is a member of the Children Missing in Foster Care Task Force. It is committed to assisting the Department in developing policies and practices that will prevent youth from running away from foster placements. Youth run away for many reasons including, but not limited to, dissatisfaction with the placement, intimidation by fellow residents, inability to accept restrictions of the foster placement, poor school performance, and/or desire to be with others outside the existing case plan.

The CWLA and NCMEC are in the process of developing comprehensive guidelines to identify needed agency/foster caregiver practices that will strengthen both the Department and the foster caregivers' abilities to prevent runaways and what each must do to locate and return runaways. Discussions with CWLA indicate that these guidelines are anticipated for release around the end of this calendar year. It is our intent to closely evaluate their recommendations and possibly incorporate them into our

contracts with Foster Family Agencies (FFA) and group homes for improved outcome measures.

- 5. The hosting of a conference or seminar, in collaboration with CWLA and NCMEC, to train social workers, law enforcement, teachers, foster parents, community providers and other professionals on their roles in ensuring safety and recovery of children missing from foster care.**

Both CWLA and NCMEC have demonstrated national leadership in the development of protocols for preventing and finding runaways. Once their guidelines are finalized we will consult with them regarding the feasibility of convening a joint conference.

- 6. The development of a training guide for County agencies and local law enforcement agencies and the Department to use in the recovery of missing foster youth.**

Both the Department and law enforcement have protocols in place for dealing with runaways. However, existing policies and practice can always be strengthened. As part of our current Task Force, the Sheriff's Department representatives will evaluate strengthening their protocol and procedures for timely location of runaway youth. Additionally, NCMEC will be releasing its comprehensive guide for suggested law enforcement protocols to deal with runaways at the end of this year. We will work with law enforcement to explore NCMEC's recommendations and determine their applicability to the strengthening of existing practice in Los Angeles County. Once consensus has been reached on best practices, we can move forward with development of a training guide.

## **SUPPLEMENTAL DEPARTMENT INITIATIVES**

I also want to share with your Board, some supplemental initiatives that the Department is undertaking to assist in solving the runaway problem. In our Torrance Office, an exciting new program has been developed called the AWOL Crisis Team (ACT). ACT is a multidisciplinary team of professionals from the Department, Department of Mental Health, Department of Health Services and Probation. The Team responds to a runaway child, provides crisis intervention, appropriate placement, and follow-up services. Its success in engaging chronic runaway youth with appropriate therapeutic intervention and preventing further runaways is good news. It is our intent to develop similar programs countywide.

Additionally, the Department is working with the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) to finalize a plan for obtaining photo identification cards for all of our children. This program had been delayed due to budget and staffing curtailments at DMV. The DMV is once again ready to assist us in developing a joint implementation plan to provide the photo identification cards. The benefits of this are twofold: each child will receive a legal form of identification, and the child's picture and thumbprint will be entered into the

State's database. This will greatly assist law enforcement in rapidly identifying and recovering both runaways and abducted children.

Finally, the Department is now attempting to digitally photograph all children who enter our system. If child welfare services are to be provided, a digital photograph of the child is to be taken within 30 days of the initial face-to-face contact or prior to the Jurisdictional Disposition Hearing, whichever comes first. Digital photographs are also to be updated on an annual basis. To supplement this policy, the Department is now digitally photographing all children who are making an initial court appearance at the Edelman Court or any other child the court determines does not have a current digital photograph on file. These procedures provide current digital photographs for the children, the court, and the statewide computerized Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS). Having current digital photographs on file provides additional assistance in locating runaway or abducted youth. It has been found that when a digital photograph of an abducted child is available, the likelihood of recovery of that child increases to approximately 75-80%.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

It is my recommendation to your Board that the Children Missing in Foster Care Task Force continue meeting on a regular basis, with sub-groups working to further identify and refine practices for the prevention and recovery of runaways. We will provide your Board with semi-annual updates on the progress we are making.

The problems of runaway and abducted foster youth are complex and finding comprehensive solutions will be a challenge. Simply returning youth to the environment they ran from is not a solution, nor is it likely to prevent future runaways. Developing resources that may include counseling, substance abuse treatment and alternative housing, in addition to finding each youth a mentor who can provide him/her with a caring and supportive adult relationship are critical to achieving legal permanency for every foster youth. The Department is fully committed to working with our collaborative partners in this effort and we appreciate your Board's interest and support.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or your staff may contact Helen Berberian of my Board Relations Office at (213) 351-5530.

DS:PVF

c: Chief Administrative Officer  
County Counsel  
Executive Officer, Board of Supervisors